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ABSTRACT

The antifoundational or "hermeneutic" paradigm, particularly as it has been internalized by the field of composition studies, exists in a weak version or a strong version. The weak version stresses interactive consensus-building pedagogical practices where discourse is remade by negotiating it with others. The strong version suggests that discursive practices are themselves constrained, and that there are relations of power that operate extra-discursively through the writing process. The weak version of antifoundational language theory misunderstands Thomas Kuhn and Richard Rorty--the strong version understands Rorty but does not go far enough. Another approach to antifoundationalism sees a way to measure the material dimension and guide hermeneutics, just as, in the weak and strong version, hermeneutics guides scientific description. Roy Bhaskar's transcendental realism suggests a program for pedagogy that imbricates the material and the interpretive. Bhaskar sets down four principles that composition theorists and practitioners might follow: (1) recognize that social forms are uniquely real and do play a role in causing events; (2) grant the existence of objective social structures which are not created by human beings; (3) consider that Rorty's notion that social interaction consists of "coping" with others is limited; and (4) realize that poetic or hermeneutic "redescription" does not render the sciences (social or physical) redundant. Carrying the antifoundationalist paradigm to its most logical ends can make for a stronger pedagogy than has so far been developed. (RS)

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ED 370 107

WEIRD SCIENCE: TEACHING COMPOSITION IN AN ANTIFOUNDATIONAL WORLD

A few years ago Maxine Hairston argued that the field of composition studies had been "revolutionized" along the lines suggested by Richard Rorty and, before him, Thomas Kuhn. She was more right, maybe, than she could have believed: social-epistemic rhetoric and composition has re-established itself in an antifoundational paradigm and remade itself into what Louise Wetherbee Phelps has sometimes called a "human science," one that transcends disciplinary boundaries and sees human cognition as radically discursive and transformative. It has taken Rorty's notion that "language goes all the way down," and has suggested that what we do when we teach writing is to make our students understand themselves as hermeneutically remaking their life-worlds.

In this talk I want to suggest that there are two ways of viewing the antifoundational or "hermeneutic" paradigm, particularly as it's been internalized by the field of composition studies. There is a "~~soft~~ weak" version (what Patricia Bizzell has called a "naive social cosntructivism") that stresses interactive consensus-building pedagogical practices, where the dictum "language goes all the way down" is taken to mean precisely that: we really do "remake ourselves" by "remaking our discourse," and we remake our discourse by negotiating it with others. Common sense suggests the weakness of this version: we may be able to get our students to change the way they speak and write, but that

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may have nothing to do with the material constraints that *prevent* real social change. There is also the "~~tougher~~ stronger" version of hermeneutics, that suggests that discursive practices are themselves constrained, and that there are relations of power that operate extra-discursively through the writing process. I myself am very sympathetic to this view, but I still don't think it's ~~tough~~ strong enough, because it stops short of suggesting how we can do anything about these coercive material forces (or phenomena or structures) that operate when we negotiate language. Here I only want to suggest that the "~~softer~~ weaker version" of antifoundational language theory misunderstands Kuhn and Rorty; that the "~~tougher~~ stronger version" understands Rorty, but--like him--does not go far enough, as some philosophers of science have pointed out; and that there is another approach to antifoundationalism that sees a way to measure the material dimension and guide hermeneutics, just as, in the two previous approaches, hermeneutics guides scientific description.

The last thing I want to do is rehash *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: we all know the story, at least the one that's filtered through *College English, Pre/Text, College Composition and Communication* and the rest. Still, it's important to restate some of the main implications of Rorty's view of hermeneutics. If normal discourse is what we do when all the parties of our "conversation" understand one another (or, as Rorty puts it, when the terms of the discourse are commensurable), abnormal discourse is what we get when we don't understand one another. It sounds like gibberish, it doesn't make sense. When this happens, we stop

trying to make the terms commensurable--we stop trying to translate one another's words into our own language--and creatively "remake" the discourse (by finding new terms) and thus remake ourselves. This creative reimagining is "hermeneutics," the result of abnormal discourse. This has implications for composition--which I'll get to in a few minutes--but it also has implications for science, which will become important near the end of this talk. For now, I want to suggest that science--the systematic description of phenomena and structures carried out through testing, and aimed at showing the more or less constant behavior of those phenomena or structures--is a normal procedure. When it runs into trouble--when the laws formulated to suggest the regularity of its descriptions turn out not to work in every case, or when things happen that aren't suppose to happen--abnormal science takes over, and scientists reimagine or "remake" the world in which these phenomena and structures occur, according to Kuhn.

It's this "creative" or constructivist approach to language and discourse that characterizes the antifoundational paradigm in composition studies right now. And this, I think, is a good thing. But as Patricia Bizzell pointed out about eight years ago, language is a complexly organized thing, and operates normally and abnormally sometimes in the same discourse. Rorty, I would add, recognizes this at some level when he notes that abnormal discourse "is always parasitic on normal discourse, that the possibility of hermeneutics is always parasitic upon the possibility ... of epistemology" (PMN 365-6). Composition studies has taken from this complicated relationship between normal and

abnormal discourse the notion that all discourse is to some extent abnormal--saying one thing always excludes the possibility of saying somthing else--and so what we should be after is the negotiated understanding of the complexity of this discourse.

Such a creative hermeneutic or consensus-building pedagogy is much like that of a Peter Elbow or a Ken Bruffee. One way to see this creative, hermeneutic dimension in Elbow is to look at his assessment of academic versus nonacademic writing, and its pedagogical counterpart, the keeping of a process journal in a workshop course. In his wonderful essay on academic discourse, Elbow suggests that the teacher in a writing course might do his students a service by forcing them to write not just academic discourse (though such a discourse does have its advantages), but also nonacademic discourse as part of an "exploration centered not just on forms but on relationships with various live audiences" (153). The process journal, in the course he and Pat Belanoff developed in *A Community of Writers*, is the place where students can look for "insights": they say that students should keep "an eye out for clues about what helps you and what hinders you in your writing" (15). Writing is a way, at least in part, to negotiate this "other," incommensurable language--the language of a peer, the language of a specialist, an abnormal description of something you don't recognize--by coming up with another, new description: the writing that follows the insights from the process journal is often clear, new, original, in which conclusions will "just come." Bruffee, drawing on Rorty and Fish and their discussion of discourse communities, suggests a pedagogy

in which students "how beliefs affect the way people within a community, and people of different communities, interact one another" through self-conscious analysis done in part through writing. This is done through the formation of consensus, a creative synthesis of the various discourses of the disparate members of the community. Change your beliefs through self-conscious analysis of the discourses you negotiate with the "other," and you will ultimately change your self.

This all seems perfectly consistent with Rorty's hermeneutic rule, in which language goes all the way down, and in which the creative function of language gives students the "freedom" to engage in abnormal discourse, to recognize our "contingency" and thereby overcome it (CIS 39-40). Bruffee and Elbow are right, in the sense that the antifoundational paradigm has given teachers of writing the ability to get students to recognize and "re-utter" the language of other students. But Fish's complaint about Bruffee (and by extension, Elbow) is also fair: the creative or hermeneutic move doesn't necessarily enable us (or our students) to overcome the threats--and the material constraints--imposed by the "scarcity of food" or "the secret police" (PMN 389). This antifoundational version of social constructionism only really allows us, and our students, to cope with the world by finding new ways of telling stories about their individual worlds. Charles Guignon, a philosopher of science, has said of Charles Taylor's antifoundationalism that "we can always make our current views look good by cooking up some story about how those views supersede the older ones, but this fact shows us more about our skills at

storytelling than about the validity of our beliefs" (89). The same charge might also be levelled at Rorty (and by implication, Bruffee and Elbow), but Rorty recognizes a role for a touhger kind of description than a narrative, hermeneutic one. Scientific description can in fact serve as a way to justify belief, and it's the desire to include a "descriptive" moment in the hermeneutic enterprise of writing that distinguishes the "tougher" antifoundationalism from the softer one.

As I suggested, Rorty recognizes a role for "normal" science or normal description even as we "act hermeneutical." Borrowing from Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gadamer and others, Rorty tries to imagine a hermeneutic understanding as an operational one: in it, human activity is not seen as an active agent (subject) separate and capable of describing nature (object), but rather as a subject who has a being-in-time or who is part of a life-world. We can't see subject apart from object, or object apart from subject. But in a hermeneutic understanding, there is both an interpretive *and* a descriptive moment. It is the recognition of this descriptive moment (and, correspondingly, a material dimension to human activity) that distinguishes the materialist antifoundationalists from the "softer" version of antifoundationalism. It has been the work of people like Greg Myers, Patricia Bizzell and Louise Wetherbee Phelps that points to this material dimension. But, as I tried to suggest, though I'm sympathetic to this work, it often leaves the question of "what systematic ways have we got in order to *do something* with or about this material dimension" unanswered.

Let me show you what I mean. Patricia Bizzell, in what is

perhaps the strongest affirmation of an alternative to antifoundational theory for composition studies, suggests a couple of models that incorporate the material dimension--and a systematic descriptive analysis of it--into writing theory and pedagogy. One of these alternatives is seen in the work of Linda Alcoff on "positionality" in feminist theory as a way to construe interpretation as one, but not the only, way to understand discourse. Positionality suggests that woman, for example, is not defined "by inherent, biologically determined characteristics... But neither is 'woman' constlructed discursively of interpretations of gender that have no objective reality" (673). Rather, we should interpret discourses produced by women through positioning those discourses among certain historically contingent (and highly complex) circumstances that have a material effect upon interpretation. Bizzell goes on to suggest that even positionality may underestimate the resistance students have to the "creative" dimension of the hermeneutic enterprise. This all looks good, until we get to the conclusion of the essay, where Bizzell says "I cannot conclude with any programmatic alternative to schemes for cultural literacy," but that we can make highly ideological avowals for or against our view. Greg Myers takes a similar backward step after his strong statement in favor of a pedagogy that works *against* the formation of a homogenizing consensus among students. Consensus, he says, "may lead to a more readable and more academic sounding paper, but it will not tell us what" the students' lives are really like.

When, for instance, the various students in a basic writing

> course at Queens College write comparisons of the places they live to the places their parents lived as children, what these places are "really like" is determined by conventional frameworks of progress and nostalgia. ...No careful attention to the description of stoops or wide lawns will reconcile these descriptions [loaded with ideological baggage] in one objective reality (162).

Myers urges, instead, a classroom strategy that is critical of the ideological baggage, and at the same time grants the individual descriptions an authority of their own, to guide the hermeneutic work of interpretation and "narrative description." But Myers, like Bizzell, ends by saying "I find I have no suggestions for assignments that are as innovative as those of the authors [ironically, Bruffee and Elbow] I am criticizing" (162).

I suppose that we might just chalk up this lack of system to Fish's point: you can't establish a composition pedagogy on an antifoundational foundation. But I think there's something else working here. Antifoundational theory--both in general and in composition studies particularly--works actively against a "scientism" that believes that the world--and truth--exists independently "out there." Science (or, at least the old-fashioned 18th-century empiricism of the Bacon-Newton-Lock triumvirate) is as context- and culture-bound as discourse, and so it can't claim a legitimate role in human understanding, since hermeneutics is a much more discursively-based strategy, one that recognizes that "language goes all the way down." And as much as Bizzell and Myers (or even Elbow and Bruffee) would like to

suggest that there may be right and wrong answers, it's not up to scientific descripiton to do this work.

As I've suggested, post-antifoundational philosophers of science dont' see things quite this way. As Joseph Rouse has suggested apropos of Kuhn and Taylor (51), "natural science proceeds quite well" in spite of "our self-understanding" (in other words, in spite of our hermeneutical interpretations of things). There is a far finer line (if there is any line at all) between the human and the natural sciences, according to Rouse, and Richard Harvey Brown, and even Rorty. But this does not mean that we can dispense with normal science, or any science at all, simply because it's somehow tainted by the ideological. I do not mean to suggest that this is the upshot of Kuhn, or Rorty (though it *may* be the upshot of Polanyi). But it is often the scientific--or purely descriptive, or the "normal," or the brutal materiality of the extra-discursive world and systematic evaluations of its regularity and its effects--that gets shortchanged in antifoundational composition theorists.

I've already suggested that even the "~~tougher~~ stronger" versions of antifoundational composition pedagogy and theory stop short of a dialectical relationship between hermeneutics and science, one that recognizes a role for description and systematic scientific (and social scientific) investigation of phenomena, and social structures, and cultural artefacts. One version that does--and one that suggests a program for pedagogy that imbricates the material and the interpretive--is implied by Roy Bhaskar's transcendetal realism. It takes up the notion of the dialectical

relationship between the human and the social sciences implied by Rorty by way of Heidegger. (I should add that I see some points of commonality between this Heideggerian understanding and Louise Wetherbee Phelps's suggestions in *Composition as a Human Science*, though I don't have time to point to them here.) Bhaskar begins with the idea that extra-discursive phenomena operate according to certain regular laws, and that science may be one way to formulate these laws. Still, he points out, these phenomena and structures aren't determined before they're caused: phenomena occur alongside other phenomena, and they affect one another. "Events, for their part, whether the fall of an autumn leaf, the collapse of a bridge, the purchase of a newspaper, the composition of a poem or the decline of a civilization are not determined before they are caused" (162). If they were, he suggests, then the only way we could change events would be to operate on their (sub-social) physical causes. This is the problem with hermeneutics: since redescription only has an effect upon our "self," this this change doesn't operate upon physical entities. There's no interaction between physical phenomena; nor between abnormal description of selves and those phenomena.

In order to allow for a stronger theory of human agency, and in order to understand a role for scientific description and a systematic analysis of change, Bhaskar sets down four principles that composition theorists and practitioners might follow. First, we should recognize that social forms are uniquely real, and that they do play a role in causing "events," and they do make a diference to the state of the material world. Scientists do the

work of observing and experimenting with the regularities of the world; authors observe and redescribe their interpretations of it, and each guides the other. Both kinds of description--scientific and literary--are reformulated, retested, redescribed in connection. At the level of composition, we should have our students realize that notions of race, gender, and class aren't just "made-up" ways of seeing the world, but that they have a physical aspect to them that can be measured and not simply "retold." Student writing needs to be seen not simply as a renegotiation of selves, but as a way to test the effect of the material dimension of those selves.

Second, we need to grant the existence of objective social structures which aren't created by human beings, but which preexist us. Inasmuch as we're born into families, or classes, and inasmuch as we're born male or female, we're already inside such structures. Any redescription of our selves must include the understanding--and systematic exploration--of this material circumscription. This is another way of saying that social life has a material dimension, and leaves some physical trace. Myers's students at Queens College were always already circumscribed by the material surroundings of their neighborhoods and the historical traces of their parents' neighborhoods; but they may (like our own students) be tempted to leave unexamined those physical traces, and their effects.

Third, Rorty's notion that social interaction consists of "coping" with others is limited, since we cope with people and the social structures and the physical world in which they reside. We

need to "find and disentangle the webs of relations in social life, and engage in explanatory critiques of the practices that sustain them" (175): in writing classes, this means that our students should see themselves as authoring social practices that can be in turn examined scientifically as well as hermeneutically. Male students who say--as they do sometimes in my classes--"feminist theory is so shrill" should see this language as producing materially and socially real effects that have measurable impact. Just as importantly, Rorty's "coping with nature" needs to be complicated, since we redescribe the social world within the natural world, and we need to recognize some of its absolutes: some natural resources are non-renewable, for example; nuclear waste has a long half-life and has measurable effects. The social and physical worlds are intertwined, and we need strongly to recognize this.

Fourth, poetic or hermeneutic "redescription" doesn't render the sciences (social or physical) redundant: we may be able to "rewrite" our circumstances that change with a student's utterance of "feminist thory is so shrill," for example, but there are other material circumstances that change that we can't be aware of hermeneutically, and though we can't understand them them in a hermeneutic analysis, we may observe and test those circumstances scientifically.

In short, in order to recognize that there are strategies students can use to do more than just redescribe themselves--as the weaker and stronger versions of antifoundational comp pedagogy suggest--teachers and researchers of writing need, in Bhaskar's

words, to reclaim science on Rorty's own terms. We need to see how the conflicts and contradictions Myers talks about work between and among the utterances and discourses our students (and others) write. If we're going to change things, we have to understand that there are material constraints to account for--hunger, disease, poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia--and allow these considerations and analyses to guide hermeneutics. To deny this material dimension is tantamount to simply saying that any redescription looks as good as any other, and leaves students saying "I know how to write, but I'll be damned if I know how this changes anything."

Clearly, consensual pedagogies aren't enough. We need a pedagogy that suggests not just how language is formative of a life-world, but how rigorous scientific inquiry allows us to see when hermeneutics masks and when it enriches understanding. We need not to be scared away from "controversial" topics like war, poverty, AIDS, and other social problems because these are the places where material constraints are most apparently working alongside the production of discourse. As I've tried to suggest from the beginning, I'm not so much arguing against the antifoundational paradigm, as I am trying to suggest how carrying it to its most logical ends can make for a stronger pedagogy than we so far have developed. I'm suggesting for composition that we don't take the antifoundational revolution on faith, but that we understand the role for science and hermeneutics in the creation of a life-world, lest we do ourselves, our discipline, and our students a disservice.